



# Coral Spawning Season is Upon Us

Ben Richards, FKNMS Program Specialist

Every year, a few days after the late summer full moon, something wonderful and amazing happens in the nighttime waters of the Florida Keys - the corals of the reef spawn. In one extraordinary event, usually around midnight, the entire reef explodes in a ticker tape parade of the marine world. Many stony coral species are broadcast spawners, which means that like many fish and other marine creatures, they release their eggs and sperm into the water column, letting them mix in the surface currents.

While not the most efficient means of fertilization, the sheer numbers of eggs and sperm released ensure that some will meet, giving rise to the next generation of coral animals. After fertilization the resulting larvae drift in the ocean currents generally for 3-4 weeks before settling on an open area of hard bottom or bare substrate. They will never move again. Growing from that point by usually less than a centimeter a year, [staghorn branches are an exception, extending at a rate of about 10 cm/yr.] the young coral will eventually become a large coral head or elkhorn cathedral that makes our Florida reefs spectacular.

With this August's full moon falling on August 22, the elkhorn and staghorn corals should spawn during the period between August 24 and August 26th. The star corals follow a few days later, somewhere around the 28th-30th of August. As usual, the corals will spawn by their own timetable.

To watch the corals spawn, head out to the reef in the evening or at night. The calmer the night, the better. Be sure to bring lights and whether snorkeling or diving, you should be able to see the spectacle. As the spawning begins, you may start to see tiny white, pink, or orange spheres rising out of the center of each coral polyp. Some corals may soon be covered with thousands of these tiny egg packets. In an instant, the eggs will be released en masse and the water will fill with millions of floating BB-sized packets.

Corals in the more southern regions of the Caribbean usually spawn a month after Florida's corals, or spawn in both August and September given the lateness of August's full moon. Sometimes Florida corals will spawn twice in one season, too. Corals as far north as Bermuda may spawn in late July as well as August.

*Note: This article appeared in the Summer 2002 issue of the newsletter of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary, **Sounding Line**. For more information, visit: [floridakeys.noaa.gov](http://floridakeys.noaa.gov).*